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TAGS: PREL MOPS MARR PGOV NATO IZ DA

SUBJECT: DANISH PM ANNOUNCES IRAQ WITHDRAWAL, INCREASE IN AFGHANISTAN

REF: COPENHAGEN 63

Classified By: Ambassador James Cain, reasons 1.4b,d

¶1. (SBU) Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen announced February 21 that Denmark will radically scale down its presence in Iraq in August 2007 and will then deploy additional forces -- perhaps as many as the net 400 soldiers to be pulled from Iraq -- to join the Danish battalion in Afghanistan. Rasmussen stressed that the decision was based on expectations that Iraqi forces will be able to assume full responsibility for security this summer; in keeping with long-standing Coalition policy, he said, British and Danish forces will reduce their forces as the Iraqis take control. The Prime Minister also emphasized that the decision had been coordinated with Coalition partners -- mentioning his conversations the previous day with President Bush and PM Blair, as well as with Iraqi PM Maliki -- and that Denmark will remain engaged in Iraq as part of the Coalition, providing additional resources (four observation helicopters), training support, ten new advisors to Iraqi ministries and approximately \$17 million in new refugee assistance.

¶2. (C) The prime minister's announcement tracked closely with the outline that Danish national security advisor Bo Lidegaard provided the Ambassador and DCM earlier that day, in which Lidegaard described a withdrawal of Denmark's 400-man mechanized battalion in Basrah at the end of the current rotation in August. Lidegaard reported that the PM will seek extension of the current parliamentary mandate at least to the end of 2007 to cover remaining forces involved in the NATO and Coalition training missions and support for the four helicopters (some fifty to sixty soldiers). In his address, PM Rasmussen indicated that his government has the support of the Danish Peoples' Party (DF) for the mandate extension, virtually assuring its passage, but expressed hope that his plan will receive broader backing within the parliament (initial reactions from the opposition suggest that it will not). Lidegaard said the PM is cautious about portraying the plan as a simple transfer of forces from Iraq to Afghanistan. Because of the corrosive political rancor over the Iraq deployment, the government wants to keep its proposal to expand Danish troop numbers in Afghanistan separate, in hopes of broader parliamentary support.

¶3. (C/NF) While indicating understanding for the Danish decision, the Ambassador and DCM conveyed to Lidegaard our disappointment with the way this decision had been reached, with little advance notice. Such an approach is inconsistent with the policy of "no surprises" the Danes have long advocated and to which we have fully adhered. Lidegaard apologized, explaining that the timing of the decision was forced upon them by the British, and that PM Rasmussen was determined that the news not leak and force him into a corner (especially since the Danes could not be certain that the British wouldn't reverse course at the last minute; as if to

drive that point home, Lidegaard took a call from his UK counterpart during our meeting, in which Nigel Sheinwald reportedly gave him the "final go"). Lidegaard noted that the Danes are very dependent on the British in Iraq, just as the Lithuanians, in turn, are dependent on the Danes for their own Iraq deployment (Lidegaard said that Rasmussen was at that moment speaking with the Lithuanian PM).

¶4. (C) Comment: Shifting Danish forces from Iraq to Afghanistan may allow Rasmussen to extricate himself from the unpopular Iraq deployment with some measure of honor, while maintaining his credentials as an ally. Even if the opposition doesn't give him any credit (arguing that Denmark should withdraw entirely), the move should help neutralize the Iraq issue here and give the government greater leeway to pursue deployments elsewhere. There is broad backing here for Danish and NATO engagement in Afghanistan, including from the main center-left opposition parties. Our immediate focus will be to nail down the Afghanistan deployment and encourage the Danes to look at increasing their engagement in Afghanistan even before forces are freed up in Iraq.

CAIN